THE MAYORS' INSTITUTE ON

CITY DESIGN

Design Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts Fall 1991

Design Guidelines: Who Needs Them?

What are urban design guidelines? A complex topic that arises repeatedly at the Mayors' Institute on City Design (MICD), design guidelines are an important city design tool, and they merit more time and examination than is afforded at the institutes themselves. Alumni mayors were asked for the first thing that comes to mind when they think of urban design guidelines. Burlington, Vermont, Mayor Peter Clavelle said, "Urban design guidelines provide a strategy for protecting visual quality. Also, they can be a significant element of a community's economic development strategy." Davenport, Iowa, Mayor Tom Hart responded that when guidelines are in place, "there's a flow to a community rather than 25 different developers' concepts of what's beautiful."

Urban design guidelines take many forms. They may be mandatory or advisory—carrying the full force of law, or serving less formally as the basis for executive policy. Design review is the process used to assure compliance with design guidelines, but is often conducted in the absence of written guidelines. Urban design guidelines are often confused with historic district guidelines, which generally are a special case of urban design guidelines and whose focus on conformity of style and materials is only rarely a consideration in urban design guidelines.

In high- and low-rise cities, human-scale design considerations help create streets and buildings that provide a sense of orientation, security and connection to the larger whole. These are essential to lively, animated downtowns and streets. Moreover, economic benefits rebound from such sites, as real estate consultant Michael Buckley points out: "Good design affects the performance of a place, its economic vitality."

Mayors and resource people alike specified elements of urban design guidelines that contribute to a human scale and pedestrian-friendly environment. Some of these are grid streets, rather than a system of cul-de-sacs, cut-throughs and alleys across blocks. Maintenance of the curb edge and a consistent building edge are also important, helping to properly frame the outdoors into a coherent public space, and preventing the erosion of space brought about by varying setbacks and parking lots. Architect Joan Goody also emphasized the importance of city character in establishing guidelines: "The clue to a city's character is in historic street patterns and the way buildings have responded

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MICD Alumni Breakfast

The first Mayors' Institute alumni breakfast was held at the 1991 U.S. Conference of Mayors Annual Meeting in San Diego. Approximately 40 alumni attended.

Since its inception in 1986, numerous mayors have requested that the Mayors' Institute sponsor an alumni event in order to reinforce their original Institute experience. The breakfast, an attempt to honor this request, provided the opportunity for the mayors to discuss urban design issues and hear a speaker on urban design, and for the Mayors' Institute to receive feedback about ways it could further assist mayors in addressing urban design problems.

Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley, a co-founder of the Institute while he was USCM President, acted as host of the breakfast and gave an introduction and history of the Institute. He remarked that 123 mayors are now Institute alumni and that they could "fill volumes with how the Institute has already begun to change the cities in our country—almost every mayor could give examples of how the insight they gained [through the Institute] enabled them to change the development of their cities."

The breakfast speaker was architect and urban designer Alex Krieger, who is director of urban design programs at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His presentation covered urban design concepts, emphasizing, "The physical character of a town *is* important and as an issue, it transcends time." Plans are underway for another alumni event during the January 1992 U.S. Conference of Mayors Midwinter Meeting in Washington, D.C. ■

Alex Krieger responds to questions following presentation.

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to them. If you're able to sniff that out, you have the essence of a place."

The mass, form and bulk of buildings are also basic considerations. George Latimer, the former mayor of Saint Paul, Minnesota, specified coherence of mass and form as especially important in downtown Saint Paul. "Around the Lowertown section, we have lots of new construction, lots of different styles, but mass and form follow the late 19th century district that it fits into." Urban designer John Kriken also noted that mass, girth and bulk are spelled out very precisely for construction in San Francisco, "So you don't get a very big blocky building next to a finer one."

Requirements for landscaping and open space were also mentioned as integral aspects of a human-scale environment that urban design guidelines can specify. Mayor Hart mentioned that the ratio of impervious surface to green area was a basic concern in the design guidelines being drafted for a new commercial development in Davenport—the first area of the city to be developed with guidelines in place.

Why do we need urban design guidelines? According to architecture critic Robert Campbell, "They're necessary in a pluralistic society... You can't rely on private initiative to be responsible for the public good. Not that developers are bad; there's just no prevailing consensus over the right or wrong way to do things . . . In a world with as many options as ours at present, the only way to achieve harmony in the built environment is by public consensus."

John Kriken discussed development tendencies in the absence of guidelines: "Unless the public interest is expressed, development will almost always seek to be as large as it can possibly be, by right, in all dimensions. It's very difficult for architects to substantively redefine this development potential. Eventually they will be pressed to totally maximize what's available. If a city expects a different kind of development, it must make this known. Wishful thinking is not enough." Kriken added, "In many communities where the very freedom to do whatever you want was the initial thing that attracted investors; [it] has been the very thing that eventually killed them."

Often, the need for urban design guidelines goes unnoticed until major blunders in development occur. Particularly in cities that are trying to promote growth, asking developers to adapt their plans to local requirements seems counterproductive at first glance. George Latimer spoke of the first major development to occur in Saint Paul shortly after he became mayor. The Town Square shopping center was a breakthrough—the first new development in 15 years, but its placement and forbidding concrete facade are acknowledged as architectural disasters. "I look back sadly on how our early eagerness to please allowed development that didn't fit," he said. "We can now see that even economically, it isn't as viable as things that came along later," when more precise urban design standards were in place. This negative experience sparked a concerted focus on design that served as a foundation for the resurgence of major areas of the city.

One reason design guidelines are enacted in reaction to bad development, and not before the fact, is the city's reluctance to dissuade or confront development interests. This is one of the most serious issues of concern in creating and implementing design guidelines. Developers take risks, and a city relies on them to do so. Yet in many cases, developers' profit motives and a city's right to good design are directly at odds.

According to Mayor Clavelle, "It's possible to be intimidated by the rhetoric of developers . . . But in my opinion, the reality is that they're willing to abide by sensible rules and guidelines that are made clear at the front end. Developers I've talked with say, 'I'll play by the rules, I just want to avoid surprises.'" Similarly, Mayor Latimer said, "I don't think there's ever been an important project lost because the city set out design standards . . . Once you set standards,

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Urban Design Guidelines: Tools in Many Forms

Urban design guidelines occur as part of the web of local law and policy that governs city planning. They range from having the full status of law to being advisory to policy, and may:

- be formalized as law as part of zoning ordinances, as is the case in San Francisco, Pittsburgh and Portland, Oregon;
- be part of master plans and as such they may carry the force of law—for instance, where zoning follows the master plan. They may also be advisory to a master plan;
- take the form of a stand-alone municipal ordinances (ordinances which establish design review commissions exist as well, as in Boston and Bethesda, MD);
- take the form of the executive guidelines a planning department or other agency uses as the basis for its design review decisions. (Design review also occurs without written guidelines in place.)

There are advantages and disadvantages to both formal and informal guidelines. From a legal point of view, a jurisdiction is always better off in a court challenge if urban design guidelines have been formally adopted. However, formal guidelines should not be written with so much specificity that they impose a design style.

Decisions based on advisory guidelines are more easily challenged in court. However, decisions based on a specific set of criteria applied in a consistent fashion have far greater viability than decisions that have no written basis. Advisory guidelines are weaker legally than formalized guidelines, but they are easier to modify. They can be changed by executive authority, usually without city council review.

The adoption of urban design guidelines by a locality is always a question of whether state law allows it. In some states, the express authorization of the state legislature is required for a locality to enact laws, as in the state of Virginia.

This summary is based on an interview with Jerold Kayden, attorney and planner, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

MICD: South
March 1991

Tulane University

RESOURCE TEAM

Mayor Richard Arrington
Birmingham, AL (keynote)

Diana Balmori
landscape architect

Robert Becker
planner

Mina Wright Berryman
Design Arts Program Director

Michael Dobbins
city planner/urban designer

Ronald C. Filson
architect

Florence Ladd
sociologist

Grover E. Mouton, III
artist/architect

Mario di Valmarana
historic preservationist

MAYORS AND DESIGN PROBLEMS

Mayor Hazel Beard, Shreveport, LA: riverfront revitalization. Discussion of the appropriate scale and type of development including some type of festival park.

Mayor Charles DeVaney, Augusta, GA: improvements to a downtown entrance corridor which passes through a light industrial/commercial area.

Mayor Mike Dumas, El Dorado, AR: physical/design linkage and reorganization of uses for several existing properties including recreation facilities, public library and performing arts center.

Mayor Evelyn Lord, Beaumont, TX: pedestrian linkage between downtown and riverfront park, with railroad "loading" tracks separating the two areas.

Mayor V.M. "Vic" Nussbaum, Jr., Greensboro, NC: renovation of a historic train station as a transportation center to accommodate both buses and trains, with pedestrian linkage to downtown.

Mayor Saul N. Ramirez, Jr., Laredo, TX: the placement of a convention center and hotel complex in relation to the downtown, the airport and transportation corridors.

Mayor Edward G. "Ned" Randolph, Alexandria, LA: the design of a convention center in order to better address the street and river view.

Mayor C.C. "Frank" Self, Greenville, MS: the redesign of parking and access to a lakefront park optimizing use of the levy.

Mayor Wilbur C. Smith, Fort Myers, FL: the design of a municipal mixed-use complex including city offices, public library, and retail space.

MICD: Northeast
April 1991

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Mina Wright Berryman
Design Arts Program Director

Mayor John Bullard
New Bedford, MA (keynote)

Robert Campbell
architect/architecture critic

Susan Child
landscape architect

Paula Collins
real estate developer

John de Monchaux
architect/urban designer

Gary Hack
planner/urban designer

Frank Keefe
real estate developer

Alex Krieger
architect/urban designer

Mary C. Means
historic preservationist

Mark Schuster
planner

Sam Bass Warner
urban historian

Mayor William Burney, Jr., Augusta, ME: redevelopment of a 16-acre site along the Kennebec River near downtown where mill buildings once stood. Discussion of appropriate kinds of commercial uses for the site.

Mayor Cardell Cooper, East Orange, NJ: redefinition of uses to encourage redevelopment along the main street corridor to capitalize on traffic flow from large mall at one end and train station at the other.

Mayor Gene F. Eriquez, Danbury, CT: the design of a parcel of land in the town center for commercial development. Possibility of housing strongly indicated.

Mayor James Howaniec, Lewiston, ME: revitalization of downtown spurred by creation of an arts district. Reopening and improvement of industrial canals adjacent to downtown.

Mayor Karen B. Johnson, Schenectady, NY: improving city image by developing entrance corridors to the downtown with "gateways," landscaping, and a new signage program.

Mayor Kevin J. Sullivan, Lawrence, MA: adaptive use of a vacant mill building to stimulate economic activity in downtown.

Mayor Alice Wolf, Cambridge, MA: revision of zoning ordinances to create a mix of affordable housing and light industry in an 80-acre, mostly vacant tract.

MICD X: April 1991

University of Virginia

RESOURCE TEAM

Mina Wright Berryman
Design Arts Program Director

Tersh Boasberg
land use attorney

J. Max Bond, Jr.
architect

Michael Buckley
real estate consultant

Warren T. Byrd, Jr.
landscape architect

Nancy Rutledge Connery
infrastructure consultant

Allan B. Jacobs
city planner/architect

Edward Logue
developer/attorney

Donlyn Lyndon
architect/urban designer

Laurie Olin
landscape architect

Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr.
Charleston, SC (keynote)

Phoebe Wall Wilson
architect

MAYORS AND DESIGN PROBLEMS

Mayor Denny Bowman, Covington, KY: Appropriate methods of landscaping and regulating/directing future development for two entrances to the city: a new interstate interchange and a new "Y" ramp off of a historic suspension bridge into downtown.

Mayor Thomas Campbell, Idaho Falls, ID: design options to improve the intersections of a bicycling/jogging trail along the Snake River with highways and the railroad.

Mayor Robert Coble, Columbia, SC: streetscaping plan for a main entrance corridor to the city which passes through a historic warehouse district that is being converted into specialty shops and restaurants and leads to the state capitol.

Mayor Ann Cummings, Montpelier, VT: arts district; how to link existing structures and "reorganize" parking to make it less visually dominate.

Mayor Pete Kinch, Everett, WA: economic development boom; discussion of ways to guide new development to lessen the impact on the city's scale and character.

Mayor James Scheibel, Saint Paul, MN: how to connect individual arts and cultural institutions in the downtown through pedestrian enhancements, design guidelines, etc. and to use the facilities to encourage economic development.

Mayor Thomas M. Whalen, Albany, NY: the city's negotiations with a developer regarding a new downtown mixed-use development adjacent to historic downtown core and existing residential area.

MICD: Midwest May 1991

University of Minnesota

Joan Abrahamson
urbanist/attorney

H. Alan Brangman
Design Arts Assistant Director

Catherine Brown
landscape architect

Harrison S. Fraker
architect

Jerold S. Kayden
attorney/planner

Mayor Daniel Kemmis
Missoula, MT (keynote)

William Lamont, Jr.
city planner

Edward Logue
developer/attorney

William R. Morrish
architect/urban designer

Janet Marie Smith
developer/architect/planner

Gregory Tung
architect/urban designer

Mayor Charles E. Box, Rockford, IL: renovation and expansion of the city hall (a historic bank building) focused on whether expansion should be made to existing adjacent structures or rehabilitating the old city hall a few blocks away.

Mayor Glenda Kelly, St. Joseph, MO: downtown development and revitalization requires bringing together more than twenty organizations and groups with varied interests. Discussion focused on city's leadership role and design strategies.

Mayor Joseph E. Kernan, South Bend, IN: due to renaissance in the East Bank industrial district, the city sought guidance on types of controls to use to guide design and ensure attention to detail on infill and redevelopment projects.

Mayor Merle D. Lewis, Huron, SD: design and development of residential district on a tract of undeveloped land adjacent to a city park, a lake and the James River in the northeast quadrant of the city.

Mayor Bernard L. McKinley, Waterloo, IA: development and design of relocated Route 218 corridor, design guidelines and gateway themes discussed.

Mayor James P. Perron, Elkhart, IN: redevelopment of city-owned tract of industrial property requiring environmental clean-up on the east bank of the river. Costs and future plans for site discussed.

Mayor Daniel M. Pierce, Highland Park, IL: city policy for design of infill projects and redevelopment of downtown land considering height, massing, density, use, and appearance.

Mayor Katherine Trummer, South Saint Paul, MN: conflicts with railroads over the use and redevelopment of a 47-acre former meat packing site and nearby 60-acre stockyard site cleared for redevelopment for light industrial uses.

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people will meet them." Clavelle concluded: "In fact, developers that do make an investment understand that guidelines will protect their investment, that their investment won't be undermined by an inferior building next door."

Mayor Juanita Crabb of Binghamton, New York, agrees: "The developer sees the design criteria as a plus," relating her city's experience with a new downtown retail mall. The developer can use the project as an opportunity to estalish a reputation as downtowns begin to revive.

A market with many smaller developers, all of whom have a lower level of debt exposure, "will help avoid the crazy boom-and-bust cycle—where two or three huge office buildings go up, the market turns, and you have ten year's worth of inventory sitting empty," developer Robert Davis explained. In a market dominated by a few huge developers, "the scale of bankruptcy and unemployment is far more devastating to a city . . . than if you have many small developers, some of whom may go bankrupt, but most of whom will survive by lowering rents." In this way, guidelines can establish what Davis describes as a "more level playing field between the city and developers," the foundation for a more resilient economy.

Many mayors see the current economic downturn as an opportunity to plan for future development. "I'm a firm believer in the idea that when things are slow, it's time to plan," said Mayor Clavelle. "With the economic slowdown, now is a good time to get our house in order." During slow economic periods, opposition by development interests will be at a minimum. Mayor Latimer agrees: "When the economy is down, everyone can do a little thinking about what the city should feel like. Right now a lot of cities are enjoying a little respite from the development crunch of recent years . . . Even now, the city of Houston is passing its first design codes in this period of relative quiet."

The farther these design ordinances reach, the better, according to urban designer Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. She advises mayors to start thinking of their cities' design in terms of 50 years or more. "All cities . . . should start thinking about a process that would literally design a city predictably, to change the current situation where zoning codes over time change the city unpredictably. What's needed is planning on the level of what Daniel Burnham outlined for Chicago . . . Specific 50-year plans that cut boulevards through the city, that pinpoint where parks and civic centers will go—these are the kinds of things cities should be looking at. The methods of control we seek now are inadequate without this kind of attention."

Urban design guidelines are one of many tools that can be used to help shape the fabric and framework of a city. As former Boston Redevelopment Authority director Ed Logue remarked on mayors' role in their cities: "Anything that mayors do that creates good urban design, they will remember all their lives, and they will be remembered for it." ■

CAMPBELL'S RULES

One perspective on developers and guidelines is summed up by Robert Campbell's "Rule Number One," which states: The more barriers a city erects against development, the greater the number of developers that will try to build there. *What?* Campbell explains: "The more trustworthy the guarantee that the context is not going to deteriorate around you, the stronger the inducement to build . . . Second, developers are very aggressive people; they love to get into a game where you're trying to exclude them." A third reason follows from the fact that developers want to build good buildings, but they often feel the investment is too risky. "In a regulated environment, developers can have the pleasure of doing a better building without worrying about pricing themselves out of the rental market . . . Urban design guidelines can make it affordable for them to do a good building by leveling the competition up to a higher standard."

"What is your definition of urban design guidelines?"

According to **Robert Campbell**, architecture critic for the *Boston Globe*, urban design guidelines are "the rules governing the physical form of the city—height, setback, street width, plantings—everything that has to do with the physical city—on down to street furniture, lighting and newsstands." Campbell stresses that the distinction between legislated absolute guidelines and advisory guidelines is a very important one.

Robert Davis, the developer of Seaside, FL, considers urban design guidelines the tools for "forming comfortably scaled streets and squares. They can go further and form beautifully framed and textured streets and squares. But," Davis notes, "first and foremost is their scaling: Good streets and squares are essentially outdoor living rooms and they invite people to spend time in them. And, as in any good room, there is a sense of enclosure and proportion of space and height."

Real estate consultant and principal of Halcyon, Ltd., **Michael Buckley** sees urban design guidelines doing two things at once. They are "the criteria by which gifted designers are encouraged to go beyond the ordinary to create spaces of lyric invention, all the while understanding the framework for linkage between properties. At the same time," Buckley adds, "they protect against the lowest common denominator in development."

According to **John Kriken,** partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in San Francisco, urban design guidelines are "essentially about the public interest." He notes that a city may not want to restrain development everywhere, but, "In almost every city there is something that is of value, one place that the city feels very strongly about." For these places the public interest should be made explicit, and guidelines spelled out to protect it.

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, principal in the Miami architecture firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk, believes conventional planning often fails "to speak to the question of what makes a street a good street." In her words, "Urban design guidelines should be rules that structure urban space, which define a space geometrically in three dimensions—the section of a street, the volume of a square and how buildings make that space—by prescribing their relationship to that space in detail."

ALUMNI NOTES

This past summer, **Mayor Sharpe James** (MICD Fall 1989) won the 1991 City Livability Leadership Award from the U.S. Conference of Mayors and Waste Management of North America, Inc. The award honored the mayor for exemplary leadership in developing effective programs that have enhanced the livability of **Newark, New Jersey**. The judges cited James for his "steady effort and major role in attacking the city's problems from all angles, and achieving a true renaissance for the city."

Mayor Dirk Kempthorne (MICD Spring 1989) has led a year-long planning process that has involved 450 citizens of **Boise, Idaho**, in updating the city's comprehensive plan. Kempthorne says, "It's been a grassroots effort. The object is not to have a fancy bound report . . . instead, it is to have something that can be understood by everyone." The city will review the draft plan in a series of televised public forums.

"There is heightened awareness and public support here now for urban design," said **Mayor Thomas Hart** (MICD: Midwest 1991). "We are very busy. We've got $66 million of development downtown and all of it is being carefully scrutinized." Ken Ostrin, **Davenport, Iowa**'s Program Manager for Land Use Ordinances, credits the mayor with the city's new design initiatives. He worked with the mayor to set up a Downtown Design Review Committee. He is also drafting the city's first historic district and layered zoning ordinances.

PHOTO CREDIT:
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Upon his return, **Mayor Denny Bowman** (MICD Spring 1991) made a special presentation to the **Covington, Kentucky** city council. "The institute helped me to take stock of what we have. I learned that Covington may be trying to grow too fast." He now sees preservation as a important leadership tool. Leah Konicki, the city's preservation officer, said that the mayor is now a "born-again preservationist."

Mayor Debra Ertell (MICD: West 1991) of **Federal Way, California,** said, "The Mayors' Institute was tremendous. After I returned, I took the city council on a three-day retreat to evaluate and explore our vision for the city's future. We are a new city. Because we are fighting terrible traffic congestion, there was general agreement that the city needed to begin to shift from being totally automobile-dependent to more pedestrian-oriented."

At the institute, she presented an 83-acre city center project. The city has purchased the land and begun talks with developers to do a study for the area. The study—financed by a state grant, private developers, and the city—will include both a comprehensive transportation study and the center city plan. Ertell says that design standards will be outlined in detail.

Following MICD: West 1990, the University of California at Berkeley architecture department sponsored a studio that focused on **Mayor Nancy Flemming**'s design issue. Students explored waterfront design and development alternatives and the class drafted a master plan for the **Eureka, California**, site. The mayor and city manager came to Berkeley for a student presentation and invited the class back to do a final presentation for the city council. Student drawings were exhibited in the corridors of city hall.

"The benefit from the Mayors' Institute was extraordinary," said Mayor Flemming. "It was an opportunity to learn how design affects everything in your life. . .We are currently working on updating our general plan. For the first time we are going to have urban design and historic preservation guidelines as part of the plan. Getting it on the books will affect us for the next 20 years."

Mayor William Burney (MICD: Northeast 1991) of **Augusta, Maine,** returned to M.I.T. with his planning director for a demonstration in the computer simulation lab. "It helped me realize that we had some of these capabilities in-house. Computer simulation is potentially a great resource for us." The city is seeking funding to develop plans to address design linkage between downtown districts.

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CALENDAR

October 27 - 30, 1991
MICD XI: University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

November 7 - 10, 1991
MICD West: University of California, Berkeley, CA

January 30 - February 2, 1992
MICD Midwest: University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

March 19 - 22, 1992
MICD South: Tulane University, New Orleans, LA

April 2 - 5, 1992
MICD Northeast: M. I. T., Cambridge, MA

April 9 - 12, 1992
MICD XII: University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA